

AN AMDO TIBETAN VILLAGE NEW YEAR  
TRANCE MEDIUM RITUAL

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ABSTRACT

Gling rgyal Village's (Tongren County, Rma lho [Huangnan] Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon [Qinghai] Province, China) Mag pa Mountain God *lha ba* Lo sar (Tibetan New Year) Ritual is described. Despite recent scholarly attention to Reb gong *klu rol*, ritualized *lha ba* activity and dances in the context of Lo sar in Reb gong have been ignored. Ru zhol ma and Ru gong ma are Gling rgyal groups that held the ritual on the first day of the first month of the Chinese Lunar calendar. This presentation describes preparatory activities, rituals at Mag pa Shrine, and the Ru zhol ma threshing ground in the late twentieth century, illustrating that *klu rol* embraces certain dances and other activities that that are also performed during Lo sar.

KEY WORDS

Gling rgya, *lha ba*, Lo sar, *klu rol*, Tibetan, Qinghai

## INTRODUCTION

Dpal ldan bkra shis<sup>1</sup> and Stuart (1998) discussed research on *klu rol*. Since that time, Epstein and Peng (1998) have written about *klu rol* in the context of ritual, ethnicity, and generational identity based on observations made in the villages of Sa skyil and Sog ru in 1994, Dpal ldan bkra shis and Stuart (1999) have published a short descriptive article<sup>2</sup> on Gling rgyal *klu rol*, an English translation of Xing (1998) has appeared, and Sadako Nagano (2000) has described Sog ru Village's *klu rol*.

## GLING RGYAL LOCATION

Gling rgyal Village is located in eastern Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, 190 kilometers south of Zi ling (Xining), the provincial capital of Mtsho sngon (Qinghai), and approximately five kilometers south of Tho rgya (Baoan) Town. This area is known as Reb gong—an area including Tongren County, Rtse khog (Zeku) County, and southern Thun te (Tongde) County of Mtsho lho Tibetan

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<sup>1</sup>Dpal ldan bkra shis (b. 1971) is a member of Gling rgyal Village's Ru zhol ma group and has participated in the Lo sar *lha ba* ritual five times.

<sup>2</sup>This article features five color photographs, two showing the village's two *lha ba* performing during *klu rol*. The younger *lha ba*, who is usually possessed by A myes Mag pa, is shown performing on a threshing ground just prior to meeting the older *lha ba*, who is usually possessed by A myes Lha ri. The older *lha ba* (retired in 1994 from the *lha ba* position) is shown atop the *tog*, a pole atop which there is a *thang kha* of A myes Lha ri. One photograph features a boy atop the *klu sdong* or water deities' pole placed in the Ru zhol ma group's threshing ground.

Autonomous Prefecture. Rong bo (Longwu) was historically the political and religious center of Reb gong because of the politically important Rong bo Monastery. Tongren County is presently home to Rong bo Town (Tongren Town) where Rong bo Lamasery is situated consequently, Rong bo/ Tongren Town is often called Reb gong.

The population of Gling rgyal Village was 2,200 (320 households) in the late twentieth century. Most villagers cultivated wheat and oil-bearing plants. A number of families earned their livelihood through animal husbandry and also herded animals for village families who reciprocate by cultivating their cropland.

## RU GONG MA AND RU ZHOL MA

Gling rgyal Village consisted of seven groups. These groups were geographically distinct and may be considered separate in terms of kinship relations. Two of the groups, Ru gong ma and Ru zhol ma, were also known, collectively, as Zhang bza' tshang (Zhang bza' Family/ Clan), and were one group in the past. They were located one kilometer apart. Collectively these two groups had approximately one hundred households and 600 members. They venerated the same mountain deities and jointly held mountain deity rituals. In addition, they shared the same *sngags khang* 'tantric hall', a small shrine where males of these two groups gathered and chanted scriptures on certain dates.

## MAG PA MOUNTAIN GOD

Mag pa was venerated only by Zhang bza' tshang. Mag pa was thought to inhabit a mountain one and a half kilometers south of the village. The village's original mountain deity, he was thought to wear brown clothing and a wide brimmed

hat with a long red or brown fringe, to have no wife, to live a spartan existence, and to be more savage than A myes Lha ri, a mountain god worshipped by all Gling rgyal villagers.

Mag pa's shrine was adjacent to the Ru zhol ma threshing ground. Villagers beseeched him to protect their crops, livestock, and families and to ensure a life unmarred by evils and difficulty. He was thought to be unhelpful in obtaining a better reincarnation.

### MAG PA *LHA BA*

In the early twenty-first century, the Mag pa *lha ba* (trance medium) was from the Ru gong ma group. He was selected in 1994 after the retirement of the former *lha ba* from the *lha ba* position. A Mag pa *lha ba* was selected from Nor brgya tshang (Nor brgya Family/ Clan) when a new *lha ba* was needed. Nor brgya tshang consisted of six families within Ru zhol ma. Males from these families were believed to have a propensity to be *lha ba*. *Lha ba* were never female.

### RITUAL ORGANIZATION

Three families known as '*grig bdag tshang* 'discipline management family' were chosen from each of the two groups on a rotating annual basis, for a total of six families. They organized rituals and raised money from the groups' households to pay for these activities. The Lo sar *lha ba* ritual was their responsibility. They provided the *lha ba* with good food obtained from the groups' households and ensured that an adequate number of males participated.

## PERFORMERS AND AUDIENCE

Each household sent a male to dance. Male villagers aged over thirty usually did not dance and female villagers, unlike during summer *klu rol*, were strictly onlookers. Villagers believed that, by participating in the ritual, they received Mag pa's blessing. If they did not attend, they believed that Mag pa might have been displeased and mishaps might have occurred to absentees and their families. Additionally, the ritual was a chance for children to wear special ceremonial dress and thus display a family's wealth, usually kept stored in chests.

The audience consisted of members from Zhang bza' tshang, as well as visitors with relatives in Zhang bza' tshang.

Traditionally, male and female audience members stood in a single circle, but never mixed. Females stood on the lower part of the threshing ground and males on the upper part. Monks and pious Buddhist laymen believed that mountain gods were worldly and that, at least for them, the ritual was sacrilege, and hindered the pursuit of sublime enlightenment; they did not attend. Certain female audience members prostrated to the *lha ba*; Dpal ldan bkra shis never observed a male prostrate to a *lha ba*.

## DANCE INTRODUCTION

*Klu rol* (used here to mean 'ritual dances') originally consisted of seventeen different movements. In the early twenty-first century, only thirteen were preserved and were the same as those performed during summer *klu rol*.

## PERFORMANCE PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES

Late in the night on Chinese Lunar New Year Eve, a man from each household offered *bsang* to Mag pa at an altar in the courtyard of the Mag pa shrine. Mountain deities were considered sentient beings, living on odors. Offering *bsang* satiated and pleased them. Strips of silk and satin known as *snyan dar* 'victory banners', were hung on presents inside the shrine.

The Mag pa shrine was built on a platform in the courtyard center. Mag pa's statue was in the shrine center. Offerings made by Ru gong ma were placed on the right side and offerings made by Ru zhol ma were placed on the left side. The two groups competed to give the most offerings in testimony to their devotion to Mag pa. In front of Mag pa's statue, men also offered *mchod me* 'butter lamps', which stayed lit throughout the night.

## MAG PA MOUNTAIN GOD SHRINE RITUAL

The ritual began at eleven a.m. on the first day of the New Year at the Mag pa shrine. Escorted by men from the '*grig bdag tshang*, the *lha ba* entered the shrine. By this time, participants and the audience had gathered around the threshing ground. Only male villagers entered the shrine to facilitate possession of the *lha ba*; they offered *bsang* to Mag pa, lit firecrackers, circumambulated the *bsang* altar, and tossed *rlung rta*, small square papers decorated with a horse in the center, above the burning *bsang*.

To further please Mag pa, consecrators offered such invocations as:

Wearing a brown robe and dwelling in a grand palace, Mag pa Mountain God, please deign to enjoy the offerings I prepared with your mountain deity

companions. May my offerings satisfy you and your companions. Please vanquish unexpected disasters on behalf of Buddhism and advance human beings' living conditions. Use your power to protect humans and harvests from diseases and storms. My mighty mountain deity, please guide me in realizing my ambitions without ignoring Buddhist doctrines. Please guide your poor subjects, ensure a bumper harvest, and be vigilant to benefit villagers and care for them as though they were your own children.

The *lha ba* stood before Mag pa's statue. His long, untied hair flowed around his shoulders and down his back. Males assembled around the *lha ba* shouting and beating drums to help him be more quickly possessed. The *lha ba* beat the drum held in his right hand and recited scriptures.

Once possessed by Mag pa, the *lha ba* handed his drum to a man next to him. He then poured three bowls of *chang zas* 'fermented wheat' from a bucket on the ground before Mag pa's statue. Next, he took the *shing rgyan*, two short wood pieces that make two halves of a cylinder. *Chang zas* glued the pieces together. The *lha ba* tossed the *shing rgyan* on the *chang zas*. If the *shing rgyan* remained glued together, the *lha ba* was accompanied by males out of the shrine to the Ru zhol ma threshing ground.

## RU ZHOL MA THRESHING GROUND RITUAL

On the Ru zhol ma threshing ground each household sent a person to offer *bsang* on a large collective pile of *bsang*. Both males and females made this offering.

The performance traditionally included approximately one hundred boys and men, forming an outer and inner circle. However, interest in this ritual, as was the case for summer *klu rol*, had faded with time and

consequently, only about a dozen men and boys participated. *'grig bdag tshang* members danced in the inner circle and other performers danced in the outer circle. Two or three men beat drums and one man beat a gong.

Performers danced to the rhythm of these instruments while circling clockwise around the *bsang*. The *lha ba* normally danced inside the outer circle although he occasionally came out to oversee the outer performers if they danced reluctantly.

Onlookers stood outside the outer circle. Some females prostrated to the *lha ba* after he was possessed by Mag pa.

Halfway through the half-hour performance, the *lha ba* gestured to the performers' leader for a dagger with which to cut his forehead. The leader then danced face-to-face with the *lha ba* to encourage him to not cut his forehead. Later he gave in and gave the dagger to the *lha ba*, who cut his forehead with the dagger, wiped the ensuing blood away with his right hand, and flicked it into the air. Blood offerings pleased Mag pa.

At the end of the performance, the *lha ba* poured three bowls of *chang zas* on the ground as inner performers shouted and hopped. The *lha ba* tossed the *shing rgyan* on the *chang zas*. The performance ended if the *shing rgyan* stuck together. If the *shing rgyan* separated, the performers continued dancing, until the *shing rgyan* did not separate when tossed. Afterwards the *lha ba*, performers, and villagers entered the shrine.

#### CONCLUDING RITUAL AT MAG PA MOUNTAIN GOD SHRINE

At the shrine, the inner performers and the *lha ba* danced clockwise around the *bsang* altar. Inner performers were somewhat possessed by Mag pa's soldiers and danced to be



dispossessed. Two men held each other's hands with their arms outstretched. Inner performers danced toward the two men and jumped across their arms. Finally, the *lha ba* did the same to be dispossessed.

Female audience members stood in the lower part of the shrine courtyard. Males stood close to the shrine building. Villagers returned home after the *lha ba* was dispossessed, and the ritual was completed.

Historically, the retired *lha ba* gave an oration but the contemporary *lha ba* did not.

#### A MYES LHA RI *LHA BA* MOUNTAIN GOD LO SAR RITUAL

In addition to Mag pa, Gling rgyal villagers venerated several other mountain gods. A myes Lha ri, the protector of all Gling rgyal Village, was the most important one. Late at night on New Year's Eve, a man from each village household and the A myes Lha ri *lha ba* congregated at Dmag dpon sgang, the A myes Lha ri shrine, a kilometer north of Gling rgyal Village. Shortly thereafter the *lha ba* was possessed and offered *bsang*. Atop the *bsang* was placed *gnam lug* 'sky sheep', which was stolen from a neighbor village as punishment because, in the past, they had once invaded Gling rgyal Village's grassland. The sheep's chest was opened while the sheep was alive, the still-beating heart ripped out, and then placed on a table in front of A myes Lha ri's statue. Two men placed the sheep's carcass on *bsang* next to the central altar. This practice ceased in 2007.

Next, the *lha ba* told villagers how to protect themselves and their property from hostile forces.

At the ritual's end a man shouted, "*Gnam lo tshes byung!*" or "The New Year has begun!"

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Baoan 保安  
Dpal ldan bkra shis དཔལ་ལྷན་བརྟམ་ཤིས།  
Gling rgyal གླིང་རྒྱལ།  
Huangnan 黄南  
*klu rol* ལྷུ་རོ།  
*lha ba* ལྷ་བ།  
Lo sar ལོ་སར།  
Longwu 隆务  
Mag pa མག་པ།  
Mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྟོན།  
Reb gong རེབ་གོང།  
Rma lho རྩ་ལྷོ།  
Rong bo རོང་བོ།  
Rtse khog རྩེ་ཁོག།  
Ru gong ma རུ་གོང་མ།  
Ru zhol ma རུ་ཞོལ་མ།  
Tho rgya ཐོ་རྒྱ།  
Thun te ཐུན་ཏེ།  
Tongde 同德  
Tongren 同仁  
Xining 西宁  
Zeku 泽库  
Zi ling ཅི་ལིང།